ON PAGE
11 May 1987

He was an average young man who struggled through school, had modest ambitions, but who worked hard and had a realistic view of himself and the world in which he lived. One day, he became a spy

The life and death of an intelligence man

■ *As congressional hearings into the Iran-Contra affair get under way this week and the Central Intelligence Agency braces for what could be some highly embarrassing testimony, a small Massachusetts town is remembering one of its own, a quiet young man who went off to work for the agency and who died just a few weeks ago in the course of doing his job. Richard Krobock was killed on March 26 in El Salvador when the helicopter that was carrying him and four others crashed in a remote area southeast of the capital, San Salvador. Krobock was 31 at the time of his death, and he had been with the CIA as an intelligence officer for only three months. Friends describe him as dedicated, smart and sober-minded—a regular guy neither unbalanced nor bedazzled by the supposed glitter of the spy game. In short, Richard Krobock was just the kind of person the CIA employs legions of psychologists to pick out of the usually crowded field of applicants. For that reason, and at a time when zealots and ideologues have done so much to compromise American intelligence, the story of Richard Krobock, notwithstanding his tragic death, is an oddly reassuring one.*

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Five days after his death, a cold, gray drizzle fell on the matted grass, and a crack of soldiers' rifles shattered the stillness as Krobock's remains were interred at Massachusetts National Cemetery in Bourne, just a short drive from the tiny seaside town of Scituate, where he was raised. Krobock was 7, a freckle-faced redhead, when he moved to the town in 1963 with his older twin brothers, Joseph and John, and his mother, Nancy. His parents had recently separated, and after several years of shuttling around the Western United States, Scituate seemed a good place for a small boy to find his feet. "I can still see him coming around the corner of the house to knock at the open back door," says Brian Shillue, who lived two houses down from the Krobocks' rented house at 33 Damon Road. "He had those big jug ears, and he walked like a stump jumper."

On to West Point

Though he seldom talked about it while growing up, and though he had not lived with his father since he was 6 years old, Krobock was determined to follow in his footsteps to West Point. Once there, however, Krobock tasted discipline as he had never known it. His mother had imposed few rules at home. But rules were legion at the academy. Classwork was tough, though it wasn't all a grind. During his third year, 3.2 percent-alcohol beer was introduced for the first time on campus—served on Saturday nights only. While some cadets played strategy board games on Saturday nights, Rick and a buddy would go to Eisenhower Hall to drink beer and talk. "Kro kept a thoughtful concern for those around him," said the 1979 West Point yearbook, "and a watchful eye to the future."

Soon after graduation, Krobock's future with the Army was thrust upon him, determined by his middling class rank. Krobock became a second lieutenant and was placed in charge of a support platoon servicing M-60 tanks at Fort Hood, Tex. It was at a time when fewer than half of all Army recruits had completed high school, and Krobock was soon dismayed by the low quality of many of the soldiers he was assigned to lead. "Dirt bags," he labeled some of his charges, and his frustration mounted as the limits of his new command became evident. Fed up, he began looking for a way out.

Keeping in touch

Even as he was serving his stint with the tank soldiers and weighing his options, Krobock returned regularly to Scituate, often driving cross-country in the foreign sports cars he had grown to love. Just short of town, Krobock would pull off Route 3A at Cohasset Liquors to catch up on news of old friends with a few fellow Scituate High graduates who worked behind the counter. Things were fine, Krobock always said, elaborating little. The Army was moving him quickly from base to base, program to program. No, he'd grin shyly, he wasn't married just yet. Maybe someday.

The easy facade belied inner change. Just as West Point and the Army had transformed his lanky teenage saunter into the purposeful gait of a soldier, they also had disciplined his mind and broadened his perceptions of the world. Though he had never been an idealist, his observations of the men he commanded and the organizations of which he was a part sometimes troubled him. Moreover, friends say, he wanted control of his own life and some small measure of influence over the world around him. "I know he didn't go to El Salvador thinking he was going to save the world from Communism," says Brendan Flanagan, a West Point classmate who remained close to Krobock. "He was no zealot. He was not motivated by tremendous idealism or flag-waving patriotism, though there was some of that in him, too. He would have seen it as a job. . . ."

Inside the 1960s-vintage M-60 Army tank, Krobock felt the lack of control most acutely. He felt, he confided to a friend, "like a sitting duck." So he decided to do something about it. In the spring of 1981, Krobock, then a first lieutenant, applied on a whim and was accepted by the Army's aviation branch. Helicopters, Krobock learned at Fort Rucker, Ala., were everything tanks were not. They were fast and responsive and, most important, they gave the pilot a sense of control. Heli-

Ex-Scituate man was CIA agent

By Melanie Maschke
The Patriot Ledger

A former Scituate man killed in a military helicopter crash in El Salvador was a CIA agent assisting Salvadoran soldiers, the U.S. State Department has confirmed.

Richard D. Krobock, 31, a captain in the U.S. Army until he joined the CIA last fall, was killed Thursday along with four Salvadoran soldiers. He was a 1974 graduate of Scituate High School.

Salvadoran government would comment on the level of fighting.

The helicopter with Krobock aboard left San Miguel, the nation's third-largest city and a major military center, and was headed for San Salvador, the capital, when the crash occurred.

Neither the State Department nor the CIA would disclose why Krobock was on the helicopter.

Pendleton Agnew, spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, claimed he did not k[illegible] and had heard

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copter training committed Krobock to an additional four years with the Army, however, and he shipped out to South Korea, where he flew the Army's OH-1 scout helicopters over the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea.

The ways of war

It was during his stay in Korea that Krobock's most intensive intellectual development seems to have occurred. During the long hours of isolation near the DMZ, he devoured the writings of Winston Churchill and the World War II German generals and delighted in reading spy thrillers. In long telephone conversations with his father, John, Krobock mused about how certain commanders would have fought a modern-day war. Ready to train on the Army's new AH-1 Cobra attack helicopter, Krobock took the unusual step of extending his tour in Korea. But by the time he returned to the U.S. to spend Christmas with his family in 1983, Richard Krobock had become a restless young man who made few commitments and eschewed any step that would encumber his free movement. For the time being, at least, he would let the Army direct where he went and what he did.

After Christmas, Krobock went on to Fort Ord, Calif., where he joined the Army's rapid-deployment force and, having been promoted to captain, took command of a group of Cobra pilots. Krobock loved California. But he also knew that the next rung of the Army ladder would put him behind a desk. By late 1985, he was thinking seriously of getting out. When his request for a transfer to Army intelligence was denied, he approached the CIA, where the recruiters presumably recognized in the mature and thoughtful soldier the qualities of a successful intelligence operative. He was offered a position, and when his Army tour ended, Richard Krobock joined the elite ranks of what is still, for all its current problems, an intelligence agency some call second to none.

The agency will not comment on Krobock or about his activities, but it is known that shortly after New Year's Day, 1987, a handsome *norteamericano* appeared on the sidewalks of San Salvador speaking heavily accented but fluent Spanish. Richard Krobock had arrived.

His responsibilities in El Salvador, inasmuch as they can be determined, involved keeping tabs on U.S. aid money to the Salvadoran government and serving as a military adviser. It must have been a ticklish and somewhat thankless task, and once in early March he telephoned his father in Sacramento, saying he was bored and homesick. It was his last conversation with a member of his family.

A small reminder

On March 26, the U.S.-made UH-1 Huey helicopter went down 5 kilometers outside a town called Chinameca, killing Krobock and the four Salvadoran soldiers aboard. In Krobock's memory, the CIA has chiseled a 2-inch star in the marble wall of the echoing entry foyer at its headquarters in Langley, Va. For their part, Krobock's friends plan a different sort of ceremony. About 200 got together recently at St. Mary of the Nativity Catholic Church, where Krobock had served as an altar boy, and they plan to meet again on August 1, in accordance with Krobock's wishes, for a big party awash in beer and memories. Long after that's over, it may be Richard Krobock's most enduring legacy that, at least among a small group of friends in Scituate, he shored up the stock of the much maligned CIA. "He made the CIA a good point on our part," says Cathy Collins, an old friend. "You never hear anything good about it any more." ■

by Melissa Healy